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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 SANAA 001022

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SUBJECT: SAADA: CALLS FOR DIALOGUE ABOUND, BUT FIGHTING
CONTINUES

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Classified By: DCM NABEEL KHOURY, FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D).

11. (C) SUMMARY: President Saleh used his May 22 Unity Day speech to announce a unilateral ceasefire for the day and once again call upon rebels in Saada to lay down their weapons in exchange for a dialogue. Meanwhile, Saleh dispatched the Minister of Religious Affairs and other clerics to Saada to engage the al-Houthis. Informed sources say that, despite official denials, Qatari officials are mediating between the Republic of Yemen Government (ROYG) and certain Saada leaders. Despite these efforts, fighting reportedly continues unabated, and some government insiders are concerned that no significant attempts are being made to reduce popular support for the rebels. NGOs estimate that there are as many as 35,000 internally displaced people in Saada who are receiving little support. Public reaction to Embassy's expressed hopes for a peaceful resolution to the conflict has been positive, and we will continue to stress the point both in public and in private. END SUMMARY

12. (U) During a nationally televised speech marking the 17th anniversary of unification between the former north and south Yemens on May 22, President Saleh repeated his call to followers of Abdulmalik al-Houthi to lay down their weapons and enter a dialogue with the government. Saleh guaranteed a "fair trial for them as a result of war crimes committed against the homeland." He also announced that in recognition of Unity Day, the government would observe a one-day suspension of military activities.

13. (U) Several days earlier, press reporting indicated that Saleh had sent Minister of Religious Affairs Judge Hamoud al-Hitar to Saada to "deliver a message" to the al-Houthis through the intermediary of tribal sheikhs. The message, according to press reports, hewed to what Saleh has been demanding since the outbreak of the latest round of violence in January: turn in your heavy and medium weapons, stop the violence, and engage in the political process through legal parties and publications. Official press reporting emphasized that Hitar's mission was not to negotiate with the rebels, but to communicate these conditions on Saleh's behalf. (NOTE: Hitar has agreed to meet with Ambassador during the week of June 2-6 to discuss his trip to Saada.)

14. (C) Following the May 12 visit to Sanaa of Qatari Emir Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani, media sources speculated that the visit was linked to attempts at mediation between the ROYG and certain Saada tribal sheikhs, some of whom reportedly are Qatari-Yemeni dual nationals. ROYG officials issued a denial, but an informed ROYG source told DCM and Ambassador that "there is something to the stories."

15. (C) A ruling party reformer who enjoys frequent access to President Saleh told Embassy officers in April that he had received Saleh's blessing to begin indirect, discreet talks with the al-Houthis and their supporters. A centerpiece of his plan was to reconstitute the recently dissolved al-Haq party, which had as members men from several prominent Zaydi families from Saada. The party, he said, could be used as an outlet to "peel away" al-Houthi supporters who are looking for a way to voice their opposition to the government, but who could be convinced to do it in a legal way. The official, who is also a tribal sheikh from another part of Yemen, asserted that "we are not just fighting the al-Houthis anymore -- we have lost the trust of the sheikhs" in Saada, and dialogue through the al-Haq party and other mechanisms could be a way of winning them back. Hitar and other religious leaders have "no credibility," he opined, because they are tied closely to the government and are not mandated to negotiate, but merely to repeat Saleh's demands.

16. (C) Unfortunately, according to this source, his entreaties with the President to allow the party's re-constitution have gone unanswered. "The problem is," he explained, "I talk to the President about dialogue and co-opting the al-Houthis' supporters, and then 15 guys follow me telling the President that we should just shoot them all. The problem is, we cannot win this war militarily and the President needs to understand this." The government, according to this ruling party member, is divided between two

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camps -- those who call for "crushing" the al-Houthis, and those who know that using only military means will not solve the problems in Saada over the long term. This source termed the appointment of a former Deputy Ministry of Interior on April 19 as a victory for the "let's crush them" camp.

17. (C) The Health Department Director for Saada told poloff that fighting has displaced more than 20,000 people, most of whom have gathered at government centers in and around Saada City. (NOTE: ICRC estimates that the number is closer to 35,000. END NOTE) The government has not been able to provide for their needs, but has also not made an official request of donors to provide humanitarian relief. The Health Director said that media reports of the military blocking deliveries of basic commodities and fuel to certain areas supportive of the al-Houthis was true, but "only as a security measure" and only "on a temporary basis" while they conduct operations in a particular area.

18. (C) A group of international and local NGOs have sent one convoy to the province since March, but estimates that the displaced people will need USD 1.3 million more in food and non-food items over the coming six months if the situation does not improve. Among major donors, only the UN has shown a willingness to send assistance without a specific government request, provided that the ROYG extends as much protection as possible to aid convoys.

19. (C) In private sessions with government and political party leaders, Embassy officers have emphasized that the USG hopes that both sides will engage in the dialogue that President Saleh is calling for, and will work toward a peaceful resolution to the conflict. Ambassador and DCM have stressed that, while the government has a duty to impose its authority everywhere in Yemen, it should also exhaust all peaceful means for ending the conflict. Yemeni political observers, both within the government and the opposition,

have generally reacted positively to the Embassy's advice in this regard.

¶10. (C) COMMENT: Post still does not believe that the Saada conflict poses an immediate threat to the Saleh regime. The longer it persists without a clear victory for the government, however, the more difficult it will become for the regime to put down unrest in other parts of the country, given all of the human and financial resources it has committed to Saada. Saleh has remained in power for over 28 years thanks in large part to his ability to cut deals with certain groups while undercutting others, all combined with military and political pressure. We believe that he will also eventually find the right formula for winning the day in Saada. How long that takes depends on when Saleh fully realizes that those advising him from the "crush them" camp not only cannot deliver an unconditional victory, but very likely have a financial and political stake in seeing the war prolonged. END COMMENT

¶11. (C) Septels will explore the role of military and tribal leaders in the Saada conflict.

¶12. (U) Minimize considered.
KRAJESKI